

---

# Found/Lost in Translation. Translating Procedures as Conceptual Tools for the Project of Architecture

VANNA CESTARELLO

## Abstract

Every new architectural project expands and evolves an archive of references which can be said to be virtually infinite. In the universe of the project — in the cyclicity of its process — we continually are witness of appropriation practices of what is already done which open a wide spectrum of mimetic approaches — from vague allusion to quotation — that are necessary and effective to the determination of the figures of the architecture project.

Working with references means knowing, possessing, changing them, coming «at the thresholds of compositional creation» according to Ernesto Nathan Rogers (Rogers, 1963); the techniques of such appropriation can be very extensive ranging from the indirect quotation to authentic operation of pick-up-and carry: inside the architectural project the transmission and transformation of forms between different places and times can be seen as an architectural translation where «things can be bent, broken or lost in the way» (Evans, 1997). So the *in fieri* project can be seen as a constant work on previous texts, a translation mode: this act of rewriting always implies a transformation. The geographical circulation of models, languages and techniques is always

a process of translation that directly involves the architecture and is reflected into the project from the most elusive interactions to true cultural transfer, or rather the set of relations that comes to establish between different geocultural areas and that allow to outline the on-going changes.

If you assume that each architectural project is a derivative of a text deemed original, from translations of translations have led to a formal sequence where gradually changed repetitions specifies their traits over time, it is possible to read some of the sub translative species.

Adaptation, calque, compensation, loan and so on (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1958), procedures borrowed from well-established translating practices could become, for an architect, ways of establishing distance relationships with analogous elements and links between distant episodes in space (and inevitably over time) to celebrate the transversal complex relations that characterize the built environment.

The aim is to investigate the ways to decline the role of reference in the design project processes assimilating as hypothesis of research the affinity of the compositional to the translational process not in the reading/drafting/review structure typical of the translator, but as a «grammar of options» among different translation procedures (calque, borrowing, transposition, modulation etc.) as tools to understand also the architectural translation, far from quotation, copy-paste mechanisms and so on. The interest does not lie in the object studied, but rather in the activity that produces it. Every building, like every literary text with its translations «speaks to us not only of himself, but of all the others he represents a transformation and helps us to understand those aspects that, considered in isolation, are not showed». (Martí Arís, 2006)

## Introduction

The forms of appropriation of what is already done are fast, sometimes viral and often without regulation. In the universe of the project — in the cyclical nature of its process — we are constantly witnessing the appropriation of materials already available, architectures constructed or designed; this abundance «multiplies the infancy of the sign» and, even as Ludovico Quaroni suggests that «the problem is relatively simple when the *warehouse* is full, and when there are ideas suitable for transposition, a transposition that is not too much brutal and superficial», these methods of transcription can be endless. Thus, the spectrum of mimetic approaches to the project could become very wide: from the vague allusion to the quotation, the distances between different times and places are shortened until the increasingly widespread tendency of a true cancellation of the boundaries between the reference and the source, the re-elaboration and the authentic author.

These expedients, which are however necessary and effective for the determination of the project's figures and shapes inside the architectural composition, are made of «going and coming, temporal differences, exchanges of responsibility between author and cultural heritage, acceleration of meaning and analogical digressions»; analysing these procedures it seems important to investigate them with a critical look those mechanisms of «different repetition» inherent to the project in its process.

The research, examining the broad spectrum of the meanings and effects of the contamination processes in the project, intends to explore that fragile boundary between citation, appropriation, and even plagiarism, urging a profound reflection on the mechanisms of production and reproduction in architecture. All these operations — from direct or indirect quotation to authentic picking and transfer operations — involve a transmission

process and consequently a transformation of forms between different times and places. This process in architecture that invests what is transformed into this distance in the practice of the project — where inevitably according to Robin Evans «things can be bent, broken or lost in the way» (Evans, 1997) — is completely assimilable to the practice of translating into literature; the object to be translated into architecture is not a text — «it is not a language consisting of sounds, words or texts, it has a material vocabulary (modules), a constructive grammar (elements) and a structural syntax (structures)» (Deplazes, 2008), therefore it does not have the structure of a text, but we know that it is like a text and «the search for an artefact that fully interprets it is completely similar to a translation process» .

Architecture and translation collimate and become contaminated in many ways. The research aims to explore the relation between architecture and translation, and so between the architectural project and the practice of translation. Researching the similarities found in making between the architectural project and the practice of translating, the paper wants to highlight a relationship between the two disciplines that are stringent but still not much sought after.

The general intent is to investigate those points of interdisciplinary contact that can go beyond the use of the linguistic metaphor of the translation discipline for the architectural project in order to critically re-read (that «active reading» that Italo Calvino suggests, which is already translation) experiences of architectures designed and implemented through the lens of the consolidated translation procedures in the practice of translation. The study intends to identify and infer from the translation procedures those technical-interpretative tools to widen the spectrum of possible approaches to the reading of references to the architectural project in the cyclicity of its process.

## Collecting an hypothesis

### *Inizio modulo*

The intuition that the paper and the general PhD research want to sink — the research hypothesis — concerns the assimilation of the compositional process to the translation one. The focus regards the mechanisms and procedures of the translation practice to reread the results of architectural translation from the Modern Movement, when the idea was spread that a lingua franca for architecture could effectively embody the spirit of time universally. The deepening of this vocabulary, which contains in itself ductile concepts and some already explored in architectural discourse (as in the case of the transposition of Quaroni), but not systematized, attempts to elaborate a taxonomy that allows to broaden the reasoning around the «machine» of the project because.

With the Modern Movement, there has been a rapid definition of a formal language, a universal language for the conquest of the whole globe; models, icons, exceptions, anomalies were created in her womb. Buildings not for this reason concluded and unrepeatable, but works of the world: encyclopedic, polyphonic, open, highly cultivated, stratified, didactic, interminable. Some of them have kept and preserve the «inter-linear version of the text [...] the ideal of every translation» (Benjamin, 1923) that condition of translatability that guarantees the transmission of the original over time; this property which is typical of some texts (of the principal sacred texts), expressed by some buildings, allows us to see those translation nuclei that are susceptible of transformations, transpositions and transfers. The architectural work is a migrant object; although apparently it is difficult to isolate it for the purpose of its direct transferability, some models go beyond their borders due to the presence of a cultural flow that facilitates

and conveys the transmission and transformation of form; this process — when it is translation — evidently differs from other mechanisms of assimilation, adaptation, integration, appropriation, which instead refer to those particular conditions in which an object (foreign) is reformed only according to certain rules dictated by local conditions; the research intends to explore what happens in these criss-cross contamination processes, in the transport of models and paradigms downstream an intercultural communication (Ackan, 2012). We will experiment an in-depth study of the reading methods that lead to the recognition of translation paradigms within the project.

The new focus on the project as a complex place for automatisms, logical passages and analogies will make it easier to introduce the strategies and procedures borrowed from the discipline of translation in the studies of French linguists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet to regard them as real mechanisms composition. They will allow architecture to move from the reference to the project through increasing degrees of transformation of the original, as happens with the translation units of a text aimed in the target language. Loan, cast and literal translation will organize that family of translated architectures that speak of citations, appropriations and fragments in the project; transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation will be explained through those examples that have investigated the possibilities of transformation of the reference through a sequence of logical choices. To each procedure it has been recognized a translated architecture, whose correspondence will be verified through a specific representation (plan, section or elevation) which, supported by images and intertextual recognitions, expresses its relation with its original.

## **Translated architectures, two families of procedures**

The project in progress can be seen as a constant working of previous texts, a modality of translation, and in the act of rewriting between distant times and places a transformation will always be triggered. The geographical circulation of models, languages and techniques, is always a translation process that directly involves architecture and is reflected in the project by the most elusive interactions to real cultural transference or that set of relations that are established between different geo-cultural areas and that allow to delineate the changing changes in place.

It is to the life of the forms and forms of time that we want to refer in this part of the research, to the theme of the migration of form, of the losses and compensations that are activated in the transfer; This is the intention to deepen the translation of the model, of the spirit of harmony and eternity that certain forms reverberate because, as Quatremère de Quincy states «everything is specified and given in the model, everything is more or less vague in its type» (Quatremère de Quincy, 1844). We intend to investigate whether the model, taken as an original, could contain its «interlinear version» , or rather its potential translatability. Model therefore as a proto-text in the translation and proto-type practice in that of architectural composition. «In this sense we speak of a terraced house as a model and the housing unit of Le Corbusier as a model» (Cellini, 1993). The reading of the architecture models and the subsequent derivations involved is the active reading of Calvino, which is already a translation, in fact "[...] as it is known, an author is really read only when translated, or the text is compared with a translation, or comparing versions in different languages.» (Calvino, 1983).

Le Corbusier will return in more than one translated architecture used as a case study. He, like other masters

to whom we refer — Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright — has had translators, emulators, forgers. Their buildings — the so-called early works of Kubler — were taken, transplanted, re-released into a new circle (Kubler, 1962).

### **Quotations, appropriations and fragments in the architectural project; the case of the «literary translation»**

The procedures deduced from the translation practice can allow the re-reading of the references in the project: a known architecture is thus *torn* from its time and its place to be put back into play in a new project. The ways and the declinations of these appropriations open a wide range of possibilities: we intend to investigate them beyond a logic of vague classicism or new mannerism, or in a logic that is affected by postmodern heritage.

The first procedures that we intend to illustrate here, those that respond to the attempts of a translation «word by word»; according to Vinay and Dalbarnet, the literal translation is legitimate above all between languages that share the same culture. It happens that between different languages triggers a conscious or unconscious imitation that often makes literal translation an absolutely effective procedure. These translation mechanisms leave little room for transformation.

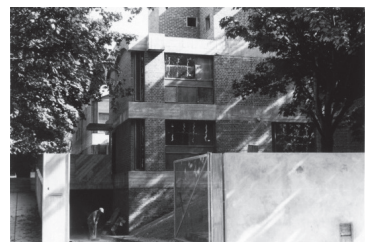
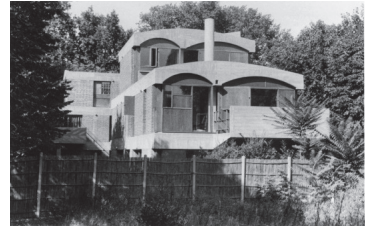
Among these we can consider literal translation as fundamental, where the translator supervises the passage from the language of origin to the translated one in order to obtain a correct procedure, that is to say that he only has to worry about the linguistic servitudes (collocations) that are specific to a language and cannot be changed. The translator is not engaged in any kind of text manipulation or re-creation, he simply makes the text in another language. This type of translation if it is true that it does



not betray the original, puts it aside, remixes it within the derivations, as one of the possible translations. The literal translation is typical of sacred texts, of the Bible. As Borges also explains well with the use of some pertinent examples in his American lectures, this type of translation when it does not produce estrangement can still beauty, that which derives from turning in another language a message, a meaning, which remains intact.

The Ham Common apartments are the first commissioned work of James Stirling completed in three years in 1958 with his partner James Gowan. The building is interpreted here as an evident literal translation in England of Le Corbusier's Maison Jaoul that Stirling had the opportunity to visit and describe several times, in the years immediately preceding the drafting and completion of the project, on two trips to France between 1954 and 1955.

The plans of the two buildings return a strong literality, despite the obvious differences — the staircase is external to the Richmond building and common to several apartments — the spatial sequence that leads from the entrance to the living room is the same, the kitchen space is both cases not completely separated (for the first time for Le Corbusier) and the fireplace orients and brings together in the heart of the house; compared the prospects and the materiality of the details that emerge from the juxtaposed photographs, however, highlight the differences that do not distort Stirling from Le Corbusier, but bring it closer to that ideal formed in his imagination. The differences will be subtle, faithfully a literal translation. The Ham Common Apartments make the Maison Jaoul, more rational, in a sense recovered from the original assumptions of Garches; in addition to the more well-known assonances of the plan organization, from accesses to internal elements such as the fireplace, in *ordering*, Stirling, for example, introduces a more accentuated line in the front lines that will divide the slabs



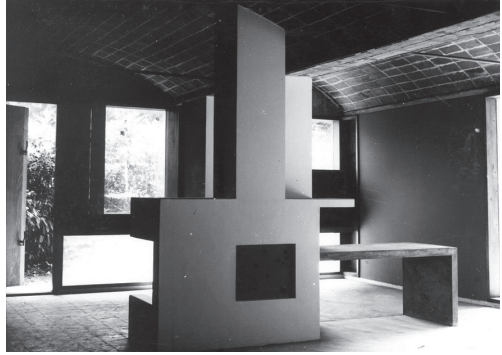
*James Stirling, Site visit at the Maison Jaoul, 1954.*

of concrete slabs, from the walls in bricks to separate the two different materials together more clearly; the bricks will be in Ham Common resumed but arranged in a regular and regular grid scheme with the recurrent lines between the rows clearly distinguishable, calculated on one side to increase energy efficiency compared to the different climate, on the other to reduce the waste of materials : the mortar is cashed in that quantity that serves to give each brick a specific shade of its own; the cement is cast in such a way as to have only a slight horizontal line, and not a random score as in the Le Corbusier building: all this gives a more mechanistic and primitivistic direction to the work, bringing back the original, through the reflection of the its translation, in the place provided by the consolidated formal sequence. Stirling translates trying to say something new not about his present, but about his past: a revisionist work that intends the project as a correction of the already done, showing that also the dynamics of influence and the prevailing predilections can constitute the support for a subsequent re-elaboration in the future.

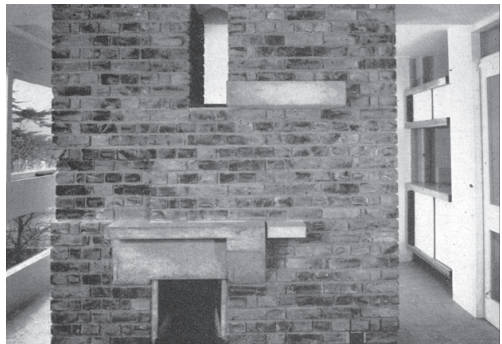
*Le Corbusier, Maison Jaoul, Neuilly-sur-Seine 1954. Floor plan 1:500.*

*James Stirling, Ham Common Flats, Richmond 1955. Floor plan 1:500*





*Le Corbusier, Maison Jaoul, Neuilly-sur-Seine 1954. Facade detail and fireplace.*



*James Stirling, Ham Common Flats, Richmond 1955. Facade detail and fireplace.*

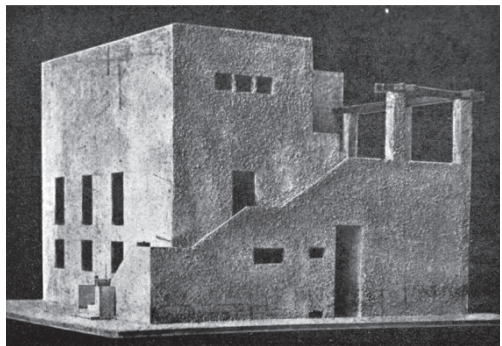
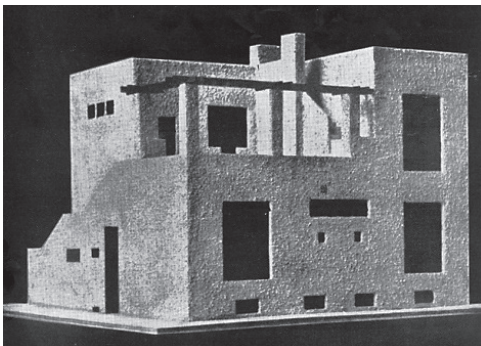
**Possible algorithms of transformation through the architectural project, the case of the transposition**

In the second part of the description of the proceedings, Vinay and Dalbernet explore more complex situations, those that impose lexical, semantic and cultural changes to the translator. Scholars pursue the assumption that languages can be superimposed even by means of adjustments, transformations, which, as in the compositional process of the architectural project, denounce «the exquisitely artificial character of the operation» (Grassi,

1988). The translator architect experiences equivalence and formal correspondences through these mechanisms; the intent is the identification of rules of transformation from one linguistic code to another.

The first work by Aldo Rossi (designed and produced in collaboration with Leonardo Ferrari) is the home of the Ronchi di Versilia, published for the first time in the number 291 of *Casabella* in 1964, five years after the monographic issue on Loos, and just before leave the magazine. We know, through the writings of Benedetto Gravagnuolo, that the poetic legacy of Loos in Italy, is expressed significantly only after the second post-war period; at this time Aldo Rossi will significantly immerse himself in Loos's study and will return a mosaic of reflections not only critical but also steeped in research on the project, the latter so far less detailed. The choice of references is not always a practice from the conscious principle; there are forms of time that are almost subtly made room in the architect's archive, others that are deliberately taken and even theoretically motivated in the process. In this synthetic frame of reference it will not be risky to consider the villa in Versilia the translation — transposed — of the Villa Moissi of Venice by Adolf Loos of 1923. The house was never actually realized and the project were published drawings and a perspective view of the study model.

*Adolf Loos, Villa Moissi Venice, 1923.  
Study model.*



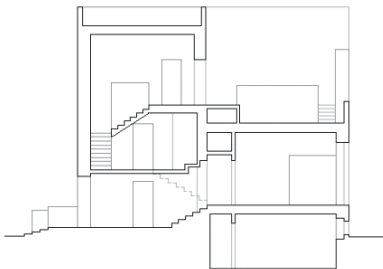
In the Ronchi villa there is the same tension towards an essential form that Rossi highlighted for Loos' work but at the same time that irrepressible need for expression of the interior in the articulation of the volumes that he had already read in Villa Moller. Thus in his villa Rossi, by renouncing a second internal staircase — which allowed Loos to obtain a certain continuity of the empty space along the vertical section through further openings in the walls — he felt the need to amplify the idea of the uninterrupted space working with a 'articulated horizontal organization for autonomous levels, with slight differences in height between the environments. The representation that best reveals these transformations is the section, where the space project is expressed: Rossi's space as shown is ideally walkable at eye level along a diagonal net that, starting from the plan, conforms the sequence crossing of threshold-spaces, with living room and room at opposite poles and respective openings towards the pinewood. Loos is interested in bringing this concept up vertically, but the raumplan of «continuous and contiguous spaces, rooms and threshold, terraces», is here less accentuated, perhaps for the research of «transcription in a modern language of the typological model of the Mediterranean house», making Villa Moissi, a translation already at the start, and then Villa ai Ronchi a «translation of a translation» as Paz would say. Rossi reverses the vertical with the horizontal, the compactness of the volume with the decomposition of solid white juxtaposed.

The interest is not all concentrated in the richness of the interior, where however we recognize, the research in the scanning of the scenes, subtly different along the crossing of the section and defined by the thresholds between the private rooms; also outside Rossi expresses that sensitivity for the backgrounds «that the more you look at them behind the buildings and move forward, and become the highlight of what must be represented» and for their overlapping as fixed scenes matured in «The architecture of the city». Also

in the photographs, as influenced by the photographs of Loos selected by him for Casabella, the goal is the highlighting of the white and stereometric volumes, the absence of any type of ornament and detail almost as to make it doubtful that the building is completed: a sense of suspension that underlines the abstract character of the work, which seems surprisingly close to the model of Loos for Venice that stood out against a black background.

The landscape is homogeneous on all fronts of the house and just mentioned; the high stalks of the Ronchi pine forest appear more like a plot that interposes between architecture and the observer than the portrait of a specific place; this condition of visual stillness makes the attention that refers entirely to the articulation of the volumes, and perhaps above all to the position and proportion of the holes that are subtracted from them, some minute, others elongated (the blackened niches in china, the newsagents for the imagines): a corner of an interior environment emptied into the façade, which does not work with the surface — like other windows — but weighing the highest volume and diverting attention from the external staircase, perhaps spurious element for Rossi of composition. It is as if the work returns to photography, treated like a diagram, an exact and iconic

*Adolf Loos, Villa Moissi, 1923. Section.  
Aldo Rossi, Villa ai Ronchi, 1964.  
Section.*



representation of the work, which, as in the starting reference, as a transcultural medium, makes it susceptible of future transpositions.

## Conclusion

In the analysis of pairs or key sequences it is possible to observe how each specific procedure carries with it a certain transformative quota: the original reference thus in some outcomes maintains a certain autonomy and recognizability, in others it is completely reworked, to the point of dissolving between the lines of a new text.

## Bibliography

Baule G., Caratti E. (a cura di), *Design è Traduzione: Il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2016

Benjamin, W. *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923); tr. it. *Il compito del traduttore in Walter Benjamin, Angelus Novus. Saggi e frammenti*, Einaudi, Torino 1962

Calvino, *Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo* (1982) in Italo Calvino, *Saggi. 1945-1985*, Mondadori, Milano 1995

Ginzburg, C. *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia*, Torino, Einaudi 1986

Corbellini G., *Lo spazio dicibile. Architettura e narrativa*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa 2016

Deplazes A., *Constructing Architecture. Materials Processes Structures. A Handbook*, Birkhäuser Verlag, Basilea 2008



Evans, R. *Translations from drawings to buildings and Other Essays*, Architectural Association, Londra 1997

Moretti, F. *Opere mondo. Saggio sulla forma epica dal Faust a Cent'anni di solitudine*, Einaudi, Torino 2003

Pedretti B., *La forma dell'incompiuto: quaderno, abbozzo e frammento come opera del moderno*, UTET, Torino 2007

Quaroni, L. *Progettare un edificio: otto lezioni di architettura*, Mazzotta, Roma 1977

Rogers, E. N. *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico*, Guida editori, Napoli 1981

De Solà-Morales, I. *L'intervento architettonico: i limiti dell'imitazione* in Giorgio Grassi, *Architettura = lingua morta*, Electa, Milano 1988

Vinay, J. Darbelnet. J. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais : méthode de traduction*, Didier, Parigi 1977